

## **CORRESPONDING WITH CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS: ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN, GERMAN AND JAPANESE APPLICATION FORMS**

*Sylvia Waechter*

### **Abstract**

All cultures are based on shared values, and many of them are universal. However, each culture emphasizes these values differently. Usually a certain set of values is prevalent, as well as a range of acceptable and non-acceptable verbal and non-verbal behavior. In addition, culture provides a lens through which the world is seen (Moosmüller 1997). This does not mean that people have no choice in their behavior or expressions, or that cultural frames are static. Rather, cultural frames are decided upon by the members of a culture, mostly through their cultural or collective memory (Assmann 1992). These frames constitute the link between one member of a certain culture and all its members. There can be overlapping aspects with other cultures, but a predominant communicative style exists within each culture. The existence of such difference can be demonstrated by comparing application forms and underlying cultural concepts in the U.S., Germany, and Japan. The analysis will be based on studies about main values and prevalent behavioral patterns as reflected in their respective communicative styles.

### **Key words**

communicative style, context, German culture, Japanese culture, application form, job search process, CV, covering letter

## **1 Introduction**

For the interpretation of sentences and the interaction between the text and the reader, the context is crucial. Context is highly determined by culture. Fix et al. (2003: 16) therefore add “cultural impact” (*Kulturalität*) to the list of criteria of terms and conditions for texts such as cohesion and coherence.

In the case of job search process, culture influences the entire job application procedures as well as the relevant text types and the communicative style respectively.

The central aim of this study is to examine the cultural impact of the text types covering letter and resume in the U.S., Germany, and Japan. For the analysis ten application forms from Germany, ten from the U.S. and ten from Japan have been analyzed. All applications were written by native speakers for the purpose of applying for a job at a local company.

## 2 Concepts of Japanese, German, and U.S. American culture and communicative style

According to Hofstede (2006), there are differences in terms of uncertainty avoidance (UA), individualism and collectivism (Ind/Coll) as well as power distance (PD) comparing the U.S., German, and Japanese cultures.

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index expresses a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. As listed in Table 1, both Japanese and German cultures have a high score. Both the German and the Japanese cultures are not keen on uncertainty, people prefer planning everything carefully, the societies rely on rules, laws and regulations and want to reduce their risks to a minimum.

The Power Distance Index by Hofstede expresses the extent to which the less powerful members of an organization accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Germany scores a low level on the scale of Hofstede whereas Japan has the highest score among the three cultures. In individualistic cultures ties between individuals are loose whereas in collectivistic cultures people are integrated into cohesive in-groups.

	<i>UA</i>	<i>PD</i>	<i>Ind/Coll</i>
<i>U.S.</i>	46	40	91
Germany	65	35	67
Japan	92	54	46

**Table 1: Scores for UA, PD, Ind/Coll taken from Hofstede and Hofstede (2006)**

As Stahl (1999) has pointed out, in contrast to Germans, the Japanese have a clear notion of a distinct Japanese way of behaving. One of the reasons for this can be found in the nativist movements which appeared in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These were an attempt to purge Japanese culture of foreign, mainly Chinese, influences (Gordon 2003). During the late Meiji period certain traits considered "Japanese" became institutionalized through education, media and official sanctioning (Gluck 1985). Since then a body of literature about Japanese uniqueness (*Nihonjinron*) has emerged (Sugimoto 2001). These writers argue that different schools and arts, called *do* (way) in Japanese culture, like *bushido* – the way of the warrior, *kendo* – the way of the sword, or *chado* – tea ceremony or more correctly the way of tea, share a common cultural basis. They all comprise not only the mastery of a technique, but also imply the mastery of a moral code or conduct, including appropriate non-verbal and verbal expressions (Coulmas 2003). Many proponents of *Nihonjinron*, like Doi (1971), and Nakane (1967), have described Japanese culture as both collectivistic and unique.

According to these authors, from the early stages of a Japanese child's sociolinguistic development, through the choice of language and the underlying cultural concepts, much emphasis is placed on the correct form of reciprocal behavior in human relationships, in which emotional importance is especially stressed. Emic concepts such as *amae* (indulgence (Doi 1971), also translated as 'sweetening' by Yamada (1997), *enryo* (restraint) (Inoue 1977) and *haji* (shame or embarrassment) (Inoue 1977), all are used to define the notions of 'self' and 'other'. These three major traits, and one could also add *sasshi* (able to guess/understanding) (Nakane 1967), are closely connected with the concept of *seken* (the others) – the basic reference for outward behavior (Inoue 1977). All of these writers stress that these concepts would not be so explicitly linguistically present, if the point of departure were only the self and not 'the others'. However, these concepts do not describe static positions, but change according to the situation an individual finds him/herself in. In other words they are very situation- and context-bound.

These concepts are consciously shared by most Japanese. In cases where they are not taken into consideration or followed, people might talk about their absence, which indirectly reinforces these concepts (Sugimoto 2001). Unlike German culture it becomes quite clear that these emic concepts of Japanese culture, which are also the key components of *Nihonjinron*, focus more on the 'other' than the 'self'. It can become a major false attribution error if these traits are equated with non-individualism or pure collectivism (Takano & Osaka 1999). Rather, the question is about what is valued more in a culture or society, as these values will be mirrored in its verbal and non-verbal expressions. Bachnik (1986) wrote:

"[in Japanese society] rather than there being a single social reality, a number of possible perspectives of both self and social life are acknowledged. Interaction in Japanese society then focuses on the selection of the appropriate choice, out of all various possibilities. This means that what one says and does will be different in different situations, depending on how one defines one's particular perspective versus the social other" (ibid.: 69).

Hamaguchi (1985) for example, reported that for the Japanese "the straightforward claim of the naked ego" (ibid.: 303) is experienced as childish. Self-assertion is viewed more as being immature rather than as being authentic. This point is echoed by White and LeVine (1986, cited in Markus & Kitayama 1991) in their description of the meaning of *sunao*: "A child that is *sunao* has not yielded his or her personal autonomy for the sake of cooperation; cooperation does not suggest giving up the self, as it may in the West; it implies that working with others is the appropriate way of expressing and enhancing the self" (LeVine 1986: 58).

Condon (1984) further demonstrates that the main tendency in Japanese culture is to value loyalty and group-orientation and to base public rational more on emotions than analysis. This does not mean that Japanese are not individualistic. Their rules are just different from other nations (Yamada 1997), especially when it comes to the place, timing and situation, in which an individual is allowed to vent his/her feelings.

Moosmüller (1997) gives concrete examples of Japanese behavior in business settings such as being vague, indirect, controlled, and not promoting oneself but rather referring to the actual in-group. These more emic attributes show how the Japanese are viewed by members of other cultures. At the same time, as already mentioned, Japanese might see themselves partly in the same way. A comparative analysis is given by Watanabe (2006), who shows in her study of German and Japanese business managers that the Japanese managers frame their opinions quite differently, stating them at the end of their contribution and referring to others or the actual situation in the beginning.

Some authors stress that many Japanese still feel embarrassed or even experience a loss of face when being singled out, whether positively or negatively (Inoue 1977, Nakane 1967). In either case they will not say much and mostly refer to their in-group. However, according to Sugimoto (2001), the reason for this behavior is compliance with social expectations in order to avoid trouble. Whichever holds true, the visible behavior will not differ. Our analysis will examine whether the two Japanese soccer players, who were in a sense singled out by not being nominated, reacted in accordance with the above-mentioned traits.

As will be shown below, a Japanese “way” of doing or saying things seems to be strongly advocated by some (Doi 1971, Nakane 1967). In contrast to this, Germans are not that aware of a ‘German way’ of doing things (Stahl 1999). This does not mean that certain verbal and non-verbal behaviors are not prevalent in German culture, but rather that people are not particularly conscious of it. Stereotypes have of course always existed about German behavioral traits and (non)-verbal communicative style (Nees 2000), which often tell us more about the value system of those assigning such stereotypes rather than German culture (Bolten 1999). It has been only within about the last thirty to forty years that research has tried to find evidence of which traits and styles are stereotyped, which are not, and the underlying historical reasons for this.

Hall (1959) and Hall and Hall (1985) were some of the first researchers to document German cultural traits in their research on time and space. They attributed to Germans such traits as being monochronic, low-context, orderly and very much adhering to rules. In his comparison of Germans with Americans,

Nees (2000) described the former as preferring long analysis and explanations, and thorough planning. He also noted that Germans are very much focused on competency, have a very direct communication style, and emphasize individualism in task specific settings. At the same time he concedes that Germans are very consensus-oriented, but that this consensus is reached through direct communication in official meetings, in which it is very important to voice one's opinion. "Corresponding to the strong emphasis on content, the relationship aspects of communication ... are marginalized. Direct attacks on the content of a person's communication are common, but attacks on the person are avoided by keeping the discussion impersonal and objective" (Nees 2000: 63). Heated discussions which are deemed a normal form of communication for Germans can be perceived as very combative from a Japanese point of view. Frankness is more valued than diplomacy or personal relations.

For the above mentioned reasons, Stahl (1999) recommends using a native interpreter when dealing with Germans. An interpreter not only gives one time to think, even if one understands and speaks the language, but in important negotiations s/he can also avoid serious conflict by rendering exclamations like "that's completely unacceptable" or "no need to discuss this any further" (Stahl 1999: 42) into culturally acceptable expressions. Varner and Beamer (1995) also emphasize this point, noting the importance of hiring a native interpreter especially in business contexts: "the interpreter translates but, as the word implies, also interprets the message in *cultural terms*" [italics added] (ibid.: 42).

Comparative studies of German and Japanese cultural behavior also highlight the direct nature of German communicative style. Watanabe (2006) analyzed recordings of Japanese-German negotiations conducted in English. Her research showed that the German executives were very task-oriented, hardly referring to the previous speaker at a speaker-turn, and very much focused on the topic at hand. Yamashita (2003) analyzed the role of values such as honesty, politeness, among other values in Germany and Japan. In his study he concluded that for Germans honesty is among the top values whereas politeness is regarded as less important.

Like any nation's values and customs, German ones only become obvious when compared with the values and customs of other cultures. Many of these have been compiled by Schroll-Machl (2002, 2007). Although it is not correct to directly correlate countries with cultures, it is sometimes unavoidable especially as many references continue to do so (Stahl 1999, Condon 1984). We would like to stress the point that there are many sub-cultures in each country and the values and customs mentioned are not absolute but only representative of the major tendencies in the respective countries. Bolten (1999) believes that the method

equating countries with cultures is practical “although not without problems ... still the best of all insufficient methods” (ibid.: 13).

In contrast to several other countries like the U.S., France and China, German cultural standards show: a) a high level of directness in interpersonal communication; b) a strong orientation to rules; c) a clear distinction, if not separation, between private space and time; and d) a distinct tendency towards task-orientation (Schroll-Machl 2007).

Schroll-Machl (2007) gives several reasons for the strong sense of duty, obligation and rule-orientation felt by Germans, the principal ones being: a) the influence of Protestantism; b) a patchwork of innumerable German countries and territories of all sizes until 1871, with each of them following a strict system of rules and regulations, which were well controlled; and c) the effect of Prussian militarism and bureaucracy.

Therefore, in discussions the focus will usually be on the task, fact or subject at hand. Interpersonal relations are not taken into consideration and verbal expressions can be very direct, like pointing out mistakes or criticizing the person without considering his/her face needs. A person who plans thoroughly, is self-disciplined, and works hard will earn the trust and acceptance of his/her colleagues. He/she will not achieve this by informal interpersonal communication (Schroll-Machl 2007).

As mentioned before, the communicative style in the U.S. is less direct than the German communicative style. Instead of direct orders people prefer more indirect instructions (Nees 2000, Slate & Schroll-Machl 2007). Compared to Germans, people are not that much interested in details and thorough planning. The main focus is on pragmatism, convincing instead authority combined with an atmosphere of “easy going” (Slate & Schroll-Machl 2007). Generally, U.S.-Americans prefer the trial-and-error-approach at workplace which demands creative competences and a high level of spontaneity. This is also in accord with a higher level of willingness to take risks and decision-making capability. One’s own initiative, responsibility and independence are highly valued and symptoms for a comparatively high level of individualism (Hofstede 2006). People stress on personal achievements and individual rights. As it can be seen in Table 1 above, the score for power distance is moderate. U.S. Americans like the idea of equivalent opportunities. Several laws and regulations exist in order to avoid discrimination and to foster equal chances (Slate & Schroll-Machl 2007: 136). Though the power distance score for the U.S. is 40 on the cultural scale (moderate), the United States exhibits a more unequal distribution of wealth compared to German society.

### 3 Analysis of the text types resume and covering letter in the U.S., Germany, and Japan

The job application forms in the U.S. consist of the resume and the covering letter. On the top of the page of the resume the name of the applicant is listed in an outstanding font size combined with address details in a smaller size. The structure of the resume is usually subdivided into following segments, titled “education”, “work experience”, “honors and awards”, “volunteer experience and leadership activities”, “qualifications”. For a more academic purpose resumes may also list presentations and conventions as well as memberships and affiliations.

The covering letter contains all relevant information about the motivation for the job application. The covering letter follows the style of a business letter. It should not extend more than one page.

Strictly avoided are personal data such as age (birth date), religion, marital status et cetera which could be subject to discrimination.

The lexis in both covering letter and resume is highly euphemistic and contains a lot of superlative adjectives to promote personal achievements in an outstanding manner. Following examples found in the analyzed texts demonstrate the specific choice of lexis: “able to quickly gain”, “highly knowledgeable”, “highly-accomplished”, “quick learner”, “committed to excellence in this field”, “highly skilled in...”, “my experience is in perfect line with your current needs”, “have demonstrated success in ...”, “have proven the ability to ...”.

The job application forms in Germany also consist of a covering letter (*Bewerbungsschreiben*) and resume (*Lebenslauf*). Furthermore, applicants are to add certificates and diplomas. In contrast to the U.S. many people list date of birth and marital status as information in the resume. Though that information is still recommended by most of the guidebooks, a growing number of German female applicants avoid information about marital or family status due to apprehension of drawbacks at the job application process in terms of flexibility. In case of male applicants it is highly recommended to add marital/family status such as “married” or “married, 2 children”. In contrary to female applicants, it will be interpreted positively as a symptom for stability. Another difference to the U.S. resume is the picture which is still added to the resume by many applicants.

The structure of the German text type resume (*Lebenslauf*) is as follows:

In the top of the page all personal information such as address, phone number, email address, date and place of birth and very often the marital status are listed. The picture will be posted to the left or right at the top of the page.

The personal data are followed by information about education, grades, title of diploma or Ph.D. thesis and other relevant aspects like scholarships or exchange study programs, always in combination with specified date. The next

section combines information about professional experiences, again with relevant time specification. The last section contains information about language skills, computer skills, and hobbies as an optional part. At the bottom of the resume page there is the date and the signature.

Compared to the U.S. resume the German *Lebenslauf* is much more detailed including exact and precise information about time specification and places of working experience, internships, education as well as precise titles of diploma thesis, exchange programs or scholarships.

The German covering letter (*Bewerbungsschreiben*) gives all relevant information for the motivation of the application (motivation, special interests, appropriate qualifications). The lexis of the *Bewerbungsschreiben* also contains many euphemistic and superlative words and phrases though the main focus is on describing the appropriate qualifications, character traits and technical skills acquired through education and work experience.

Compared to the application forms in the U.S. and Germany, the Japanese application form is highly standardized.

It is a pre-printed form sold in paper shops where it can be bought together with an envelope. The application form called *rirekisho* is a very structured form with fields that must be filled out. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the two pages of the Japanese application form. It would be not correct to translate *rirekisho* as “resume” since it contains more information than a German or U.S. American resume. Nevertheless, information and data usually listed in a resume are predominant.

On the first page (page one) the applicant has to fill in the complete name as well as the reading of the name (*furigana*), gender, date of birth, age, address, phone number, email address, name and address of the head of the household. A picture of the applicant has to be added. The personal information will be followed by the education and/or professional education in chronological order. The second page of the *rirekisho* (page two) contains information that would be subject to a German or U.S. American covering letter. The applicant is asked to fill in the motivation for the application, the personal strength (for instance technical skills, title of academic thesis), club activities, hobbies and personal character traits. The last field is for information about other qualifications such as language skills (certificates) or driving licence.

All information about education or certificates has to be combined with relevant time specification, the month and the year of acquirement, of beginning and ending respectively. The field “motivation” and “personal character trait” are the only fields that offer individual remarks. However, it is highly recommended by guidebooks and sample letters to fill *perseverance* in the field “personal



character trait". This recommendation of the sample letter was followed by almost all of the analyzed application samples. Character traits such as perseverance and patience demonstrate that the applicant is willing and able to fit in the prospective group. Compared to the application forms of the U.S. and Germany, much more personal and "private" information is required in the Japanese version. The lexis is not determined by an euphemistic or superlative attitude, individualistic tendencies can be hardly found. In the Japanese application forms qualifications and skills were listed and presented in a rather objective way.

The verbal expressions found in the Japanese texts are very much in accord with their cultural values and expectations such as the concept of *enryo* and group-orientation as explained above.

#### **4 Summary**

The goal of U.S. resumes is to come across as motivated, confident, capable, individual and as a team player. This is very much in accord with the cultural impacts listed above. Though there are many common aspects with American resumes, the German *Lebenslauf* has a different structure; it is much more detailed and chronological and has a strong focus on qualifications and skills. The former essay style of the resumes could not be found among the analyzed forms, all forms were structured as a list. The German resume contains more personal information than the resume in the U.S. though some aspects are changing nowadays (e.g. marital/family status). The structure and contents of the German covering letter are very similar to the covering letter in the U.S. The goal of German application forms is to come across as serious, dedicated, motivated and hard working. Much emphasis is placed on relevant (technical) skills and knowledge. The goal of Japanese application forms is to come across as hard working as well as a team player showing the ability to learn and listing character traits that will indicate fitting in. The application form is a very structured and standardized pre-printed form. Among the analyzed forms, the Japanese application letters show much more personal information than the application forms in the U.S. or Germany, but at the same time the least individual remarks.

The analysis showed that the structure and contents of the application forms are very much in accord with the underlying cultural concepts and expectations.

Cultural priorities influence the entire hiring process. This is not only true for written texts, but also for the job interviews that belong to the hiring process in the U.S., in Germany, and in Japan. The selected examples of choice of lexis demonstrated that cultural priorities also influence what is to be considered as important.



Comparing text types of the job search and hiring process will be a challenging field of research.

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氏 名 (ふりがな)	本人現住所 (ふりがな) 〒				
志望動機					
得意な科目及び研究課題					
スポーツ・クラブ活動・文化活動などの体験から得たもの					
趣味・特技					
私の長所・特徴					
免 許・資 格					
年	月		年	月	



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コクヨ

Figure 2: Page two of the standardized Japanese application form